



Thoughts on helping: Black Summer bushfires 2019-2020, from the perspective of a Black Saturday survivor, My lived experience by Kim Jeffs.

In the face of this monumental disaster, most of us want to help in some way. Some will fight fires, some will volunteer their time at relief centres, some will care for injured wildlife and many will donate to bushfire appeals.

Given the scale of the emergency, many people will know someone directly affected by the fires: first responders, evacuees, those who endure weeks of uncertainty about their homes, those who lose their car, their business, or their home and, most tragically, the bereaved.

I have been thinking about the things that helped me after my home was destroyed and the father of my children was injured on Feb 7th 2009. I have decided to share these thoughts as they may help others identify ways to help those affected by the current fires. Obviously, I am speaking from an individual perspective and what helped (or didn't help) me might not hold true for the person you are aiming to help, so check in with them, or someone who knows them well to find out what is really needed. I have divided the thoughts into three vague chronological sections to help order my thoughts. They assume the person has lost their home.

The list of ways to help is long. I don't anticipate or intend that any one person perform all these tasks. Share the jobs, make a roster. Play to your strengths – if you are a good listener then spend time listening. If you are a whizz in the kitchen, cook up some food. If you love real estate, help find a place to rent. If you love animals, take the dog for a walk.

Please don't take lots of pre-loved stuff to relief centres. The experience after Black Saturday was that there was so much stuff that massive warehouses were needed to store it. Some of the goods were great, but other stuff was really only suitable for the bin. A great deal of time and effort was used up in sorting what would be useful from what needed to go to the tip. Many of the best items were snaffled early, by people who had place to store things and folks who had lost everything missed out.

Give cash, especially in the immediate phase. I cannot stress this enough. Give cash if you can. (Or put money into the person's account).

Immediate phase: shock and basic necessities

The person you are helping has a brain flooded with adrenaline and cortisol. They are likely to be hypervigilant, anxious, easily startled, not sleeping, picking at food or eating compulsively. They may have one clear fixed drive to do something (and that something may seem unwise). They will have difficulty concentrating and have poor memory as a result. They may find making decisions extremely difficult.

You can help by:

- finding them a place to stay – offer a room, fund a motel and book the room, find a relief centre or other accommodation
- giving them plenty to drink, trying to avoid too much caffeine and alcohol
- providing food – light snacky things may be better than full on meals, things with decent nutrition, make sure they are foods the person is familiar with and likes
- making sure they have somewhere to wash themselves and their clothes
- ensuring they have a working phone with charger and credit
- giving them toiletries (but check that they haven't already been given 20 tubes of toothpaste)
- taking them to the doctor or chemist to get any medications or dressings they may need, consider some eye drops for smoke-affected eyes
- give them some clothes, preferably new or near new – take them to a shop if they are up to it or ask them what they would like. Don't throw out the clothes they are wearing – these may be the only things the person owns. Ask before you wash those clothes – bag them until you know it's okay to do so, the clothes will likely reek of smoke.
- mind children so that adults can have conversations
- find somewhere for any pets, and buy any necessities for the pets
- making a roster/duty list with friends to provide support, without doubling up
- letting the person's employer know what is happening, only with the consent of the person
- offering to be a central contact point for friends of the person who want information – again, with consent. The barrage of messages and phone calls can be overwhelming.
- avoiding giving them too much stuff – they have nowhere to put it

Most of all you can help by listening – to silence, to their story repeated many times, to anxieties about their community, to fears, to the 'what ifs' and the 'I should haves'. You may need to spend hours listening and just holding space. You don't need to find answers to the 'what ifs' and 'I should haves', you just need to listen – without judgement. If you can find specific information about the person's community, do so. Divvy up the tasks of listening and information gathering so that there is one person

available to listen and provide company. You might need to find a counsellor or take them to a doctor.

(The VicEmergency site has some basic information with links:

https://www.emergency.vic.gov.au/relief/#personal_well_being) You might need to debrief after all the listening, ripple out to someone less affected – don't rely on the person you are helping to debrief your own trauma.

Next phase: dealing with insurers, finding a temporary home

Having a place to be private and to feel settled can be really important. Some people may prefer to stay with family and friends but this may only be a short term option. Having somewhere to feel safe and secure is important. There may be limited options near to where the person you are helping lived. They may wish to be far away from the smoke and the burnt landscape. They may want to be as close as possible to remain connected to their community.

- Help the person make any insurance claims. Write down a list of the things that have been lost. You may have photos to assist. Some insurers want very detailed lists.
- Help the person identify any payments or grants they might be entitled to
- Help the person replace any lost documents, bank/credit cards etc.
- Support the person you are helping to identify their needs and their priorities in finding a new place to live. Do they have insurance that covers rent for a year?
- Make a list of all the suitable rental properties in the area they have specified and arrange a timetable to view the properties. Drive them to the appointments if necessary. Advocate with real estate agents. Be there as a second pair of ears. Offer to read over contracts with them.
- Make a list of the items the person needs to start a new home. You could start with the bare bones – fridges, tables, beds etc are pretty universal, but ask about specifications.
- Help the person go shopping and tick off the items on the list as they are bought. This is also the time when donations of good quality secondhand items can be really helpful – match them to the person's requirements and try to keep them in line with the person's sense of style if possible. Consider buying brands of small appliances the person is familiar with – it's hard work trying to learn the way new TVs, microwaves etc work when they all have to be done at once with a traumatised brain.
- Clean the rental place before they move in, if needs be
- Help them move stuff into the new house, unpack it and remove the packaging for them
- Mind children during the moving in
- Do a big grocery shop (or coordinate among friends) to buy all the non-perishable pantry staples like salt, pepper, cooking oil, pasta, rice plus cleaning products, cloths etc

- Make some meals for the freezer
- Have a look in your odds and sods drawer and think about the things that people might suddenly need but that you mightn't think to buy – scissors, band aids, candles, matches, torches, batteries

Keep listening. Listen about the fatigue, the ongoing sleep disturbance, the anger, the recriminations, the survivor guilt, the displacement and the difficulty making decisions. Keep listening and find help if needed.

Longer term: finding or rebuilding a permanent home, identity

How this plays out will unfold over time and involve more listening. There's no correct way to re-establish your life after trauma. One factor associated with the best chance of recovery is to have rich social connections, so you can help by facilitating a person to be gently accepted into a new community and assist with them maintaining links to the place they have left.

In the longer term you can help the person navigate the rebuilding process, if that is what they choose to do. If they are relocating and wish to buy a home you could help them do some reconnaissance, come along to lend support at an auction or during the sales process. It may take years for the person to make a final decision, or they may change course. Support them and listen.

Losing everything you own can strip you of a sense of identity. That's why in the early phases it's important to give the person you are helping as much agency as they can take on when replacing lost items. A wardrobe of clothes and house of stuff that doesn't feel like 'you' serves only to underline the loss. Some of the brightest moments in my recovery have been the items returned or given to me that link me to the past: the book I'd lent a friend, the egg beater and Christmas ornament that were my grandmother's, a book with an inscription in my mother's handwriting. So if you have any items that the person had lent to you, return them. Find photos and give them on a USB or share via the cloud. Find some memorabilia. Don't assume the person wants everything to be the same as before the fire. New editions of previously loved books might not be what the person wants. Perhaps they need some LPs or CDs? Perhaps a playlist of songs curated from a happy time? Perhaps a cookbook of family recipes? Perhaps some cuttings from your garden?

This is a long list and will not have covered all the ways to help. My advice may not be right for the person you are trying to help – always ask them or someone who knows them really well. Most of all, keep listening.

With support, the person you are helping will not only survive this disaster, but likely grow and thrive over the many years that recovery takes.

My love to you all. x